

# WELCOME TO LUNCH AND LEARN!!! TODAY'S TOPIC IS:

## Vocabulary....what's in a word?

**What is vocabulary?** “The range of words in an individual or group” ([www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com))

**Why is it an important consideration for educators?**

- Learning is dependent on vocabulary because learning is a language-based activity. During the school years, students must understand and produce both the common everyday words used in conversation, and the sophisticated, academic words they come across in their readings and in classroom lectures.
- The size and depth of a student’s vocabulary has a direct impact on reading outcomes and performance in academic tasks. Vocabulary facilitates comprehension and expression of thought.

**Typical vocabulary development:**

By the age of 5, a typically developing child has an estimated expressive vocabulary of 2,100 – 2,200 words, and a receptive vocabulary of 4 times this amount. Through the school years, most researchers agree that students learn 3,000 words per year, or 7 words per day.

**How does vocabulary develop in typical individuals?**

In general, acquiring word meaning is a slow and gradual process, requiring multiple exposures for deeper understanding of word meanings. **Everyday oral language experiences** are important at all stages of development. During the school years, other pathways to vocabulary learning include:

- Wide reading, which occurs once students become skilled readers
- Educators’ incidental and explicit teaching of individual word meanings
- Independent word-learning strategies.

**Improving vocabulary in school age children (elementary and secondary):**

Two types of instruction can provide rich and varied word learning experiences for students, **incidental** and **explicit**.

**Incidental instruction** techniques include: formal and informal activities, centered on teacher talk and student interactions (dialogue, discussions, read-alouds/guided reading, and structured

independent reading). The teachers who create a “talking” classroom that provides plenty of opportunities for interacting with more sophisticated words, allow their students to acquire and enrich their vocabulary naturally and seamlessly.

Skilled educators intermingle rare, more mature and/or academic words in the context of classroom discussion and in one-to-one exchanges. They also prompt students to think about and use these words. This could be accomplished via:

- Informal one-on-one conversation with students about everyday topics or about topics linked to reading materials
- Guided reading, a powerful technique that may be used with both younger and older students to facilitate their comprehension of words in text
- Independent reading: Wide reading that is done on a regular basis is a major source of vocabulary growth. Book choice is critically important. Books chosen for independent reading must be neither too easy, nor too difficult. Students should be encouraged to read varied genres associated with grade-level themes and academic content. Students who have not yet acquired automatic word-reading skills (i.e. dysfluent readers), should be offered audiobooks, iPads, [www.audible.com](http://www.audible.com), CELA (Centre for Equitable Library Access, public library services for Canadians with print disabilities), or other technologies that assist with access to print.

**Explicit instructional methods** include the following methods:

1) Teaching individual words by:

- Engaging students in discussions about definitional and contextual information
- Providing multiple exposures to targeted words
- Engaging in deep processing of words, by associating them with known words, as well as extended discussion, categorization and semantic mapping (a language specialist may be consulted for a variety of specific techniques)

2) Teaching word-learning strategies:

- **Dictionaries:** This strategy works best if the student already has some sense of the word’s meaning. Otherwise, it is generally not effective due to dictionaries’ short and multiple definitions and lack of contextual information. For this reason, word learning from dictionaries should be considered a suboptimal strategy for all students, but especially for students who struggle with language-based learning difficulties.
- **Context:** Contextual clues to meaning may be linguistic or nonlinguistic. Word-learning from contextual information needs to be taught explicitly. Again, students with language-based learning difficulties are less successful at using

linguistic cues to infer meaning, for obvious reasons. Nonlinguistic cues, such as illustrations, are much more supportive of word learning for those with language challenges.

- **Morphology:** This method involves identifying word meaning units, such as word roots, bases, prefixes and suffixes. It is extremely facilitative of word learning because English is considered to be a “morphophonemic language;” that is, both sounds and meaning drive the print representation of the word. The website: [www.WordWorksKingston.com](http://www.WordWorksKingston.com) is an excellent source of information for teachers about the implementation of this approach, also known as “structured word inquiry.”

3) Fostering word consciousness, and invoking an excitement and eagerness for learning new words, may be accomplished with word games that focus on figures of speech, word games (tongue twisters) and word formations (acronyms, affixes), as well as many others, can be incorporated into classroom instruction.

**Which words should a teacher target for explicit teaching?** The following criteria are suggested:

- **Importance and utility:** Are the words characteristic of mature language users?
- **Instructional potential:** Are the words useful to the students within and across domains; can the words be associated to other words and concepts that are useful to the students?
- **Conceptual understanding:** Do the words allow the students to express general concepts that they already understand with greater precision?